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German Orientalism and the Decline of the West¹

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THIS ESSAY OFFERS an overview of some of my new work on German cultural engagement with “the Orient,” a region that, for nineteenth-century Europeans, embraced the territory from eastern Vienna to the Bering Straits. This is a project shaped in response to Edward Said’s path-breaking 1978 book *Orientalism*, but one that departs quite radically from his methods and assumptions. I designed the project, in part, to test his claim that colonial power relations permeate modern studies of the Orient; Said’s omission of the Germans has often been noted, with either regret or malicious delight, for they were indisputably the most important orientalist scholars between about 1830 and 1930, despite having virtually no colonies in the East. But as I dug deeper into the world of professional *Orientalistik*, and popular “orientalism,” I realized that an exclusive concentration on the impact of colonialism risks reducing a highly interesting cultural phenomenon to banality.

Thus what I want to do in this paper is to sketch a number of other cultural factors that shaped German “orientalism,” and to show that though colonizing aspirations did indeed play a role, the new popularity and political valence it gave to oriental studies did not function exclusively to perpetuate Eurocentric views. On the contrary, it is my contention that, though focused on the languages of the ancient world, German orientalism helped to *destroy* Western self-satisfaction, and to provoke a momentous change in the culture of the West: the relinquishing of Christianity and classical antiquity as universal norms.

Naturally, I am fully aware that, on the one hand, the romantics pioneered some of the historicizing strains of thought I will describe, and, on the other, that Eurocentrism was not fully destroyed by the 1920s. And I do not think rising interest in and knowledge about the Orient alone precipitated this change; natural-scientific thought and radical Germano-

¹ Read 26 April 2001.

philia also contributed heavily to the demise of ancient models. But for too long we have laid too much praise, and blame, at Darwin's door; philology, too, helped to knock the floor from "Eurocentric" history—with equally ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, orientalist philology, once freed from theological constraints, contributed heavily to Aryano-philia; on the other hand, it provided the foundations for the deep critique of "Eurocentrism" handed down to the anti-colonial and counter-cultural youth movements of the 1960s. It is this central—but unpardonably ignored—episode in the history of orientalism that I want to sketch here.

It is possible, perhaps, to trace back to Reformation scholarship a kind of German engagement with the East that tended to emphasize origins and diversity over modernization and evolutionary trajectories; but eighteenth-century German intellectuals wrote and produced travelogues and histories, biblical criticism and orientalizing parodies that looked much like the works of their contemporaries elsewhere.² With Herder and Friedrich Schlegel, a kind of orientalist primitivism came into vogue; but this only survived by dint of being taken up into the new disciplines of Sanskrit philology and Semitic literature. Institutions fix norms and career paths, and the appointment of Sanskrit philologists A. W. Schlegel and Franz Bopp at the universities of Bonn and Berlin in 1818 and 1821 set a lasting pattern. While English, French, and Dutch orientalists of this generation made the Orient a career by going there, as officials or travelers, German orientalists in this period made the Orient a career by becoming academics, and especially by becoming scholars of Sanskrit, Sumerian, and other safely dead oriental languages. Though there were, by 1914, students of modern Islamic politics and Chinese economics, this utilitarian and modernist branch of orientalism died with Germany's wartime hopes for anti-colonial *jihad*, and was, in any case, never very prominent. It is in the study of the *ancient* Orient—and especially its languages—that Germany made its orientalist fame, and it is here that the field exerted its primary cultural shocks.

It was the queen of the nineteenth-century sciences, philology, that gave scholars access to the revered cultures of antiquity. Naturally, classical and biblical philological criticism, based on both logical reasoning and deep, historical knowledge of languages, were both centuries old by this time, but until Wilhelm von Humboldt's reforms of the German educational system in 1810, the study of philology (rather than theology) was, to quote classicist Gottfried Heyne, "the straight

² For a wonderful new survey of Europe's early modern intellectual engagement with the Orient, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens: Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1998).

road to starvation.”³ After Humboldt’s reforms, however, it became possible, even fashionable, to become a career classicist; indeed, by the 1830s, one had to know one’s Latin and Greek to enter the universities at all. For subsequent generations, to be well educated meant, importantly, to know one’s ancient texts, a phenomenon that suffused all the other humanistic fields with deep knowledge of classical and especially Greek antiquity—and, particularly at the century’s end, tremendous resentment over classicism’s hegemonic institutional role.

This relationship to classical philology, and the lack of colonial presence that would have mitigated the university’s norm-setting role, constitutes one peculiarity of nineteenth-century German orientalism. But there are also others, the most important of which is orientalism’s role in increasingly radical attempts to clean up the Scriptures. This was a product of attempts to imitate classical philology, which had declared its autonomy from the theological faculty in the last years of the eighteenth century. Secularization was never so easy for orientalist; even Indology was linked, by the influential polymath Friedrich Schlegel, to primeval revelation. Before secularization could occur, orientalism had to develop its scientific credentials vis-à-vis its objects of analysis, which were, centrally, religious texts. Thus did *Wissenschaft*, for orientalists, coincide not with conservative complacency, as did classical philology, but with at least *cultural* radicalism.

It is no accident that oriental philology intensified its work in precisely the years that radical critics of young Hegelian stripe began to kick away the philological props upholding the historical veracity of the Old and New Testaments. The emergence of what has been called “liberal” biblical criticism was really the product of the convergence of these two strains, radical philosophy and specialized orientalist philology. In the 1860s and 1870s, scholars like Ernst Renan and Julius Wellhausen used philological expertise to demolish the historical testimony of the Bible. Their work, scandalous at first, but rapidly adopted as scholarly orthodoxy, showed how dangerous oriental philology could be—and how exciting. Influential both as Old Testament scholars and as Arabists, Wellhausen and Renan opened the way for scholars and an increasingly wide range of readers to explore a new, non-biblical or even expressly anti-biblical Orient.⁴ If neither Renan nor Wellhausen

³ Heyne quoted in John Edwin Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, vol. 3 (New York, 1958), 52.

⁴ Theodor Schultze’s 1898 *Buddhism as the Religion of the Future*, for example, opened by explicitly citing Strauss as the one who had demonstrated the bankruptcy of church-oriented Christianity, and Fichte as the pioneer of a metaphysics that dispensed with the whole hogwash of Jewish-Christian revelation. Schultze’s aim, it turned out, was not to do away with Christianity entirely, but to revive it as a cultural and ethical power by giving it ancient Indian foundations—and cutting European culture off from its Semitic roots. Theodor Schultze, *Buddhismus als Religion der Zukunft* (Leipzig, 2d edition, 1898).

made much use of the enormous flood of oriental sources that washed over Europe in the generation after their initial triumphs, their philological skepticism gradually eroded the foundations of historicist theology.

What finally forced open the sluice gates at the bottom of conventional human history was, however, the next generation of orientalist scholars. We have, heretofore, failed to appreciate the colossal scale of their discoveries, decipherments, and specialized studies, and the effect of this new material in opening up the ancient Orient to European view in the period between 1880 and 1914. As scholars ransacked a vast quantity of new textual and archaeological documents, they discovered the powerful influence of Zoroastrian Persia, the esoteric depths of ancient India, and the primeval innovations of the Assyrians and Sumerians. These new cultures, appealing in their antiquity, spirituality, and apparent purity, made the well-known "orientals"—especially the ancient Israelites and Egyptians—seem derivative, corrupt, and banal.

Assyriology, in particular, worked a destructive magic on older forms of orientalism, allowing scholars to tread with philologically-supported security into the non-biblical ancient East. The discovery of pre-biblical accounts of "God," "the Flood," and "the Sabbath" generated new mythographic speculation, some of it innovative and some of it bizarre, but all of it unflattering from the point of view of conventional classicists and Christians.⁵ Thanks to the Assyriological discoveries between about 1885 and 1908, the great historian Eduard Meyer testified, everything he and his contemporaries had known about the ancient Orient from the Old Testament and the Greeks had been called into question, and indeed mostly destroyed.⁶ In 1898, the Assyriologist Hugo Winckler noted a similar transformation in the field, one produced, in his view, by his generation's "pure philological-historical engagement with the Semites," something that clearly distinguished its work from that produced by its theologically-trained ancestors.⁷ The enormous scandal caused by Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch's two lectures entitled "Babel und die Bibel" suggests just how shocking this

⁵ For some interesting discussion of this subject, see Uriel Tal, *Christians and Jews in Germany: Religion, Politics, and Ideology in the Second Reich, 1870–1914* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975); Klaus Johanning, *Der Bibel-Babel-Streit: Eine forschungs-geschichtliche Studie* (Frankfurt, 1988).

⁶ Eduard Meyer's comments are quoted in Johannes Renger, "Die Geschichte der Altorientalistik und der vorderasiatischen Archäologie in Berlin von 1875–1945," in *Berlin und die Antike*, 154.

⁷ The model for this new, "pure" orientation, Winckler claimed, was classical *Altertumskunde*. Hugo Winckler, review of D. Bernhard Stade, *Die Entstehung des Volkes Israel* (1899), in *Orientalische Literatur-Zeitung* 2.4 (1899), 119.

material was in Wilhelmine Germany. In the wake of Delitzsch's first lecture in 1902, public opinion forced the Kaiser to distance himself from Delitzsch's suggestion that the Old Testament was little more than transcribed Assyrian wisdom; by 1905, the controversy had resulted in the publication of 1,650 articles and 28 pamphlets.⁸ It is instructive that this German version of the Scopes Trial involved orientalist, rather than natural scientific, undermining of the Bible.

Meanwhile, iconoclastic classicists, art historians, and Near Eastern specialists were eating away at the familiar picture of classical serenity, autonomy, and originality, using, importantly, oriental material to break down old prejudices and norms. The Vienna School of art history was particularly important in developing, in tandem, a non-aestheticizing history of artistic forms, and the study of what we now call late antiquity; these two innovations allowed scholars, on the one hand, to put Greek forms into historical context, and on the other, to appreciate the non-representational art of the East. The most radical heir to this tradition, Josef Strzygowski, made his fame by emphasizing the frailty of the classical tradition and the power of the East. From the publication of his influential polemic on the oriental origins of medieval art, *Orient or Rome?* in 1902, to his death in 1941, Strzygowski ceaselessly campaigned for the appreciation of the intrinsic beauties of Near Eastern and *völkisch* forms, a campaign that was highly influential if also noticeably (and ominously) ideological.⁹ Strzygowski was one of the most radical orientalists of his generation, but he was not alone, and his appointment to the new chair of non-European art history at the University of Vienna in 1909 points to the aggressiveness and visibility of the new, non-biblical, anti-classical orientalism of the *fin de siècle*.¹⁰

Although most professional orientalists shied away from grand narratives and frontal assaults on convention, already by the nineteenth century's close, iconoclasts outside the profession were busily employing the fruits of the orientalists' labors as weapons against orthodox, classically-oriented histories. Surely Nietzsche chose Zarathustra to be

⁸ Reinhard G. Lehmann, *Friedrich Delitzsch und der Babel-Bibel-Streit* (Göttingen, 1994), 50; Delitzsch, *Babel und Bibel: Ein Rückblick und Ausblick* (Stuttgart, 1904), 3.

⁹ See Suzanne Marchand, "The Rhetoric of Artifacts and the Decline of Classical Humanism: The Case of Josef Strzygowski," *History and Theory* Beiheft 33 (Dec. 1994): 106–30.

¹⁰ Naturally, none of these scholars were as crude as H. S. Chamberlain, who in 1899 used orientalist criticism as a stick to beat hegemonic classical humanism; he set up against what he called "Hellenic megalomania" a racist counter-history that emphasized Aryan blood rather than classical culture. See, in particular, the introductory sections to Chamberlain's *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. John Lees, 2 vols. (New York, 1968; originally published in 1899).

his philosopher hero chiefly to slap the face of his Greek counterpart, Socrates. Friedrich Creuzer's *Symbolik*, originally published in 1811, enjoyed a grand neo-romantic revival, in large part because his emphasis on the oriental origins of classical mythology appealed to anti-bourgeois malcontents like Flaubert, Jung, Richard Wagner, and Madame Blavatsky. Speaking of Blavatsky, the theosophical movement she started and the German philosopher Rudolf Steiner scientized drew very heavily on orientalist knowledge. Promoted by esoterically inclined publishers like Eugen Diederichs and B. G. Teubner, the orientalist-influenced occultism of the Wilhelmine *fin de siècle* contributed both to an atavistic primitivism, and to an elitist strain of modernism.¹¹

If "orientalist" knowledge flowed outward into the Wilhelmine counter-cultures, so too did avant garde philosophy shape some branches of late nineteenth-century orientalism, especially Indology. The Germanophile romanticism of Richard Wagner appealed greatly to scholars like Leopold von Schröder and Paul Deussen, who was, not coincidentally, founder and long-time president of the Schopenhauer Gesellschaft. Of course, there are enormous differences between the Nietzscheans, the theosophists, and the Germanophile Indologists. But in anti-classicism, in the search to find a new spirituality beyond the Bible, and in the quest to give the Wilhelmine Empire autonomous and secure cultural foundations, they shared a common set of enmities—and an inclination to fight occidentalist traditions with "oriental" truths.

As the foregoing suggests, as a cultural phenomenon, the orientalism of the immediate prewar era was deeply imbued with anti-bourgeois sentiments; the post-1890 generation, in particular, was critical of, if not hostile to, neoclassical norms and orthodox Christian principles. The East took its revenge for nearly a century of institutionalized philhellenism, and orientalism, popular and professional, tore holes in Eurocentric histories, even as, at the same time, colonizing aspirations provoked the creation of utilitarian institutions for the study and subjugation of modern Asia. On the eve of the Great War, one could find liberal-leaning students of modern Islamic politics and

¹¹ The linkages between occultist and racist thought may have been forged by Paul de Lagarde, the "orientalist" who became one of the founders of racist Germanophilia (and also edited the works of Giordano Bruno), but there were already numbers of what George Mosse has called "mystical racists" at work in Vienna before Lagarde's work became widely known. See Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution* (Madison, Wisc., 1985), 94–112. The organicist primordialism and occultist contacts of a wide range of expressionists, existentialists, charlatans, cultural critics, and popularizers (including Diederichs) is described in detail in August K. Wiedmann, *The German Quest for Primal Origins in Art, Culture, and Politics 1900–1933* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1995).

economics, like Carl Heinrich Becker—though they were still a tiny minority compared with the scholars of Sanskrit, cuneiform, Aramaic, and other perfectly irrelevant languages. All the evidence I have so far on the period of actual colonial activity, from 1884 to 1914, suggests that the German scholarly world was rapidly adapting to the need for utilitarian “orientalism”—and even more rapidly developing its plans for scholarly conquests in the East.¹² Had the Reich had more colonizing time and territory, it would have developed an orientalist sphere very much like that of the French and British. But it did *not* have this time, and when its wartime hopes for anti-colonial *jihad* died, so too did its modernist orientalism, giving way to a new romanticism that benefited greatly from the war’s further discrediting of aristocratic classicism and bourgeois Christian belief.

What I call “vitalist orientalism” had many manifestations in the Weimar era, only a few of which can be mentioned here. Many in the audience may think of Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* of 1923, or Thomas Mann’s Egyptian novels, begun roughly a decade later. C. G. Jung’s critique of Western philosophy is also an obvious manifestation of this worldview; or one can see it reflected in the desperate defenses of Western uniqueness in the works of Werner Jaeger, Friedrich Meinecke, or Martin Heidegger. Spengler’s *Decline of the West* would be, I believe, unthinkable without the radical historicization of European history produced in large part by orientalist critiques. Less well known, but deserving of more study, is the work of Hermann Graf Keyserling, author of the *other* great prophecy of Western decline in the postwar period, the *Travel Diary of a Philosopher*. This set of philosophical ruminations on his prewar travels in India and China was published in 1919 and sold nearly as well as Spengler; the *Travel Diary*, as one contemporary said, “was hailed as a kind of new revelation, a lay Bible for the orientation of the modern spirit.”¹³ After the war, Keyserling founded the so-called Schule der Weisheit in Darmstadt, an organization that was, self-consciously, half Platonic academy and half Buddhist outreach program. This curious “school” brought together a huge number of vitalistically-inclined intellectuals, from Jung to the biologist Hans Driesch, and aimed at cultural goals that were just as “revolutionary” in their way as those of the other Frankfurt-area school. Keyserling’s crowd sought to reconstruct Western self-formation not by reviving Greek and Christian norms, but by juxtaposing Ger-

¹² E.g., Martin Hartmann’s proposal “Die Arabistik—Reformvorshlaege,” in *Orientalische Literatur-Zeitung* 1.11 (Nov. 1898), 333–42, esp. 342.

¹³ Herman George Scheffauer, *The New Vision in the German Arts* (New York, 1924), 265–66.

man and oriental Geist. A comparison of Keyserling's program with Wilhelm von Humboldt's reform plan of 1810 suggests the breathtaking dimensions of this break with humanistic tradition.

The Keyserling circle was not alone, however, in pursuing oriental illumination in the Weimar era. In his retirement, General Erich von Ludendorff took up mystical theosophy. A Dr. Paul Dahlke opened the first Western Buddhist monastery near Berlin.¹⁴ The esoteric Baron Eduard von Heyck exhibited his enormous oriental art collection at his odd hotel in Ascona. The Aryan industry, of course, burgeoned. Even the former kaiser Wilhelm II, in exile, took up the study of the Orient. He grew enamored of the pan-Babylonist work of Alfred Jeremias, and furiously exchanged letters with the esoteric ethnologist Leo Frobenius on the "cultural morphology" of Africa and Asia. In a 1928 letter to his friend, the former emperor reported a recent conversation with Oswald Spengler in which Wilhelm had tried his best to convince the herald of Western doom that "we are *orientals* [*Morgenländer*], and *not* westerners [*Abendländer*]." ¹⁵ The East, after all, had some prospect of revitalization.

The image of the Orient had changed. Nineteenth-century platitudes invoking oriental stagnation were repeatedly challenged by those who now admired the East's resilience as against the constant revolutions of fortune in the West. The Greeks had once stood for youth. Now a primitivist aesthetic, the new orientalist scholarship, and the critique of Western decay made the Orient seem more authentically and enviably youthful.¹⁶ The "primitivism" of the East had become a positive virtue, and the Orient no longer seemed weak or weird. It was now the West that was degenerate and idolatrous, abandoned by God and the *Weltgeist*.

For some, the now established association of the Orient with anti-bourgeois knowledge made Eastern wisdom an essential element in a new sort of *Bildung*. For others, appreciation of the Orient figured in a campaign to save both the East and West from spiritual, or even bio-

¹⁴ Bernard Wasserstein, *The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln* (New Haven, Conn., 1988), 250–51.

¹⁵ Wilhelm II to Frobenius, 10 January 1928, in Leo Frobenius Institut Archiv, Frankfurt am Main, binder marked "Doorn: Kaiser Wilhelm an Frobenius."

¹⁶ In 1916, Hermann Hesse fondly recalled his travels in the Orient, and insisted that the spirit of the East, since he encountered it, "has been a comforter and a prophet. For never can we, the elderly sons of the West, return to primeval humanity and the paradisaical innocence of primitive peoples; but surely homecoming and fruitful renewal beckon to us from that 'spirit of the East' which leads from Lao-tse to Jesus, which was born of ancient Chinese art and today still speaks in every gesture of the true Asiatic." Hermann Hesse, "Remembrance of India" (1916) in Hermann Hesse, *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Theodore Ziolkowski, trans. Denver Lindley (New York, 1972), 64.

logical, death. The Orient had, in any event, now been enrolled in a highly significant revision of German rhetoric about identity formation, both individual and cultural. It was impossible to go back to the nineteenth century; the explosion of specialized knowledge about the East had destroyed the biblical foundations of European identity, and exploded the Graeco-centric world of the nineteenth century. Of course, it was the Aryan strain that flourished under the Third Reich; but what we might call the Keyserling version was reborn again in the 1960s as a means to complete the critique of classical antiquity's normativity, European imperialism, and the desiccation of the academy. We may well be, as Said argues, the heirs of the imperialist "gaze"; but we are perhaps equally the descendants of German orientalism, a much more ambiguous and irreversible strain of thought.